

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

We get a lot of rain here in Northwest Arkansas (about 48 inches on average per year for Fayetteville), but we also get a lot of sun (averaging 217 sunny days per year according to Sperling's Best Places). For solar cooking, as long as there is sun, it doesn't matter how cold the temperature is. The downside, of course, is that relying on solar cooking can't meet daily needs because sunshine isn't a daily occurrence. In times of emergency, such as during a storm or power outage, it is rarely sunny outside. But on sunny or partly cloudy days, it's convenient and efficient to bake and cook all sorts of things for free – and without risk of accidentally burning anything. Solar ovens also benefit the environment by using zero electricity, gas or propane.

Autumn offers a seasonal palette of dishes that go well with the beautiful fall leaves. Pumpkin bread flavored with cinnamon or a variety of spices like cloves and nutmeg is the perfect breakfast or dessert. You could eat it plain or with nuts, seeds, or yogurt for breakfast. For dessert, baking in chocolate chips or icing the loaf with cream cheese frosting is divine! There are various pumpkin bread mixes available in most stores at this time of year (even vegan or gluten-free options) but you can also make your own. The solar oven is just like a regular oven except that you'll never burn the bread with most models, because it cooks evenly without dehydration: the liquids stay inside the oven, keeping it moist. As the bread finishes baking and the sun moves across the sky, it is like an automatic "stay warm" timer is activated. It can't dry out as long as the door remains shut. Unfortunately, this means that bread has trouble browning on top to give it that finished look, but a toothpick or fork inserted in the middle will still tell you it's done. For parties and faster baking on partly cloudy days, pumpkin muffins or cupcakes are perfect for fall!

Breakfast is difficult to make if you plan to eat it the same day you cook it, because the sun isn't high enough in the sky yet. For brunch same-day, however, solar roasted roots can't be beat. There is no messy skillet to clean up later, and it may be impossible to screw up this dish. Simply chop up your preferred combination of potatoes and vegetables, add a thin coating of oil, salt, pepper or spices, and toss into an oven-safe pot (black ones cook best). Yukon potatoes, purple sweet potatoes, and carrots look gorgeous together. Or combine potatoes with vegetables like brussel sprouts, kale, and anything else you fancy. It takes a couple of hours to cook, but you can forget about it in the meantime and do something else. With a solar oven, you can forget about it all day, if needed, and safely cook when you're not even home.

Solar cooking really shines for dinner, especially if you eat close to 5:00 at this time of year because of fading daylight. It's easy to throw together an autumn chili of beans, vegetables, and tempeh with chili powder and cook it all afternoon. The vegetables will be nice and tender by dinnertime, and the cooker will keep it warm if you're not quite ready to eat until after sunset. Not everyone owns a solar oven, but don't let the coming of winter stop you from considering one. Bonus: purchasing one off-season and during holiday sales can save you money. Bon appétit!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist living in an off-grid tiny house on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer tips to those wanting to make a difference at www.MakeRipples.org.